

The Sands of Ludlow

(Now our stories combine and continue as one.)

Lapidary is a fascinating hobby, one my grandfather Douglas Kent Hodgeson also enjoyed. Decades have gone by and still I collect pretty minerals and stones wherever I can. To have a rock shop in my own town was like catnip to a kitty.

I signed up for Mr. V's lapidary and silversmith classes. The unexpected list of tools and supplies was costly, and it was hard to find the money from the family "budget". Regardless of the costs, I absorbed Mr. V's lectures. I couldn't wait to get my hands dirty on the rock saw and grinding wheels. When classes were over, I was loath to leave. I offered to help straighten his office, move items to his storage sheds and price rock slabs. I basically made a pest of myself.

As I hung around, I learned bits and pieces of Mr. V's current situation: his departed wife, his maddening lawsuit, and his health issues. I met a representative from the Prescott VA. He came to see Mr. V monthly to monitor his weight and health. The once 6'2" soldier that used to top 185 lbs. fighting weight, was now a stooped 5'9" and 134 lbs. His skin drooped into folds like a big Shar-pei puppy. The number of different medications he took exceeded thirty. He took three, 30mg Morphine tablets every 6 – 8 hours. That high a dose would cause a normal man to become a flying squirrel. Mr. V said he lived with a (5) pain level.

A few months had gone by before I was able to buy a used rock saw I could use at home. I was beginning to show off in class, creating work Mr. V was surprised to see. One sultry summer evening at home, I was trimming an agate slab on my rock saw. The doors of the garage were open to the night air. I stood still, focused on slowly cutting the stone. To my left I saw something move. There curled on the concrete floor was a big, fat black and white king snake! My squeal was from pure pleasure! For the one thing I adored more than rocks – was snakes! The saw's vibrations drew the lovely beast into the garage, and I tip toed after it to shoo it back outside.



The next day in class I told everyone about my serpentine visitor. I turned and pointed at Mr. V and said loudly, "It was you! I know it was you, checking up on me!" He just grinned.

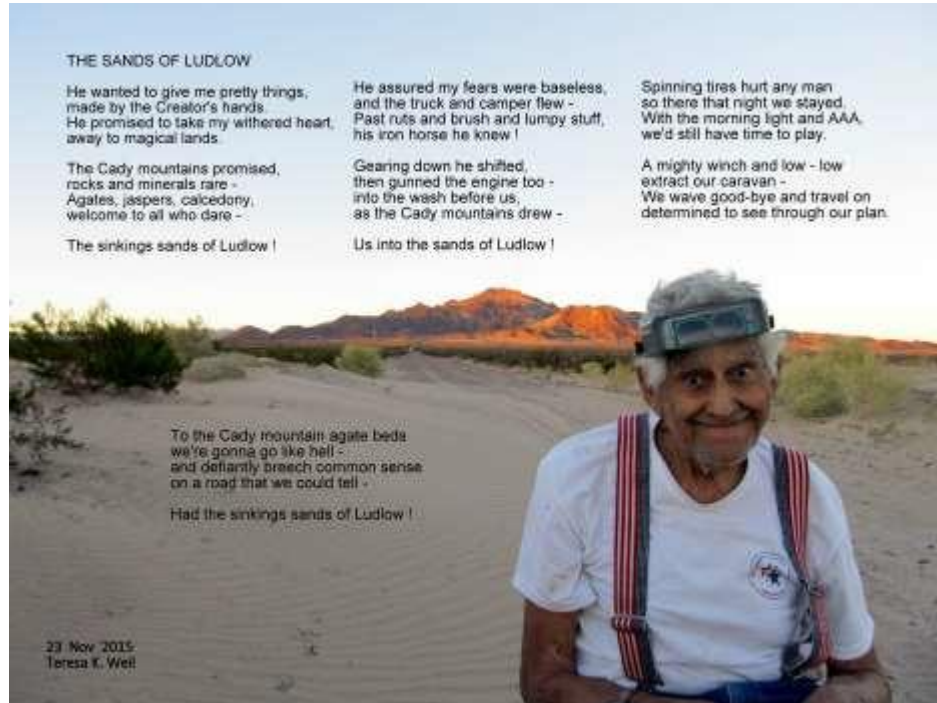
As we began to learn more about each other, we began to understand the torments we each endured. I spent more time at the Arrowmaker Rock Shop. I would drive him to the grocery store or to the VA for an appointment. I helped him pay bills and do filing. I even helped with customers. I started to record his life stories by tape recorder, because I couldn't write fast enough.

Oh, how could Mr. V (now Bob) talk! Every visit included a personal lecture session. He was aware of my marriage conflicts, and he was determined to "save" me.

"You're at a crossroad... shit or get off the pot... you're going to be miserable if you stay in your marriage."

He was right, of course, but 33 years was a lot of history to just shrug off. I said to Bob, "You know, I think I am more afraid that...if I burn that bridge...you're gonna die. You have no control...over what the man upstairs has in mind for you, or the shrapnel that's near your heart."

"NO! Hell no! As long as I can be with you, and I'm damned sure it'll be a hell of a lot longer than what I'm expecting right now. That will be my reward. Taking care of and completing my last mission in life – which is you! You're my last mission - I have to succeed."



My ears could stand only so much of Bob. Not until he physically showed me another world, did I truly begin to believe...time for a field trip.

Yep, no more than 10 minutes after AAA waved goodbye to us; having left us on solid pavement; we were stuck again. But this time, the engine caught on fire!



I was starting to see a pattern here. This kid needed a chaperone. We decided to stay there for 2 nights before calling AAA.... again.



The nag in me became shrill at times, since I didn't want to be stomping on him when he caught himself on fire.

After being rescued (again) by AAA, we had to stay in nearby Barstow, CA, because the only car rental in town was closed on weekends.



Worst rock hounding fieldtrip imaginable...and the best time of my life. I concluded the Great Spirit wanted us to stop looking at rocks – and look at each other instead. Upon my return home I sat George down and told him it was time to let him go. It was time for me to regain my self-worth and dignity. (I knew other arms would be happy to receive him.)

By the first week of the Year 2016, my soon-to-be ex-husband was totally moved out of the house. Our amiable divorce was finalized in the last week of February. By the first of March I had a new last name. Bob reminded me of a dog chasing a car—persistent, but unsure what to do once he caught it.



Bob had never had so much attention paid to him day and night. He was pampered and fussed over. I eventually put 30 lbs. back on his thin frame, to where he was no longer my 'Shar-pei puppy'.



Bob took charge and began to plan trips back to Ludlow. (No trailer this time.)



We also attended the Quartzsite Rock Show in late January 2016. The planning and logistics were totally crazy, since we were going as vendors and would stay 2 full weeks in the travel trailer, (on solid ground). This was all new to me and I was more than squeamish, towing a trailer for the first time. We survived without any mishaps and had a great time.



Bob took me on side trips to Crystal Hills and the Gold Nugget mine area. I was so happy to be out wandering around, gathering free treasures from the ravines, washes and hillsides. My joy was tempered, however, due to my concern about Bob's health. His cavalier attitude was maddening at times. I could see we were running out of oxygen cylinders while we were in Quartzsite, so I had to scramble to find a local supplier. But Bob was in his element and acted like a new man. He had a chance to reconnect with old friends who were equally happy to see him again.

Sadly, Bob's health forced the closure of his last venture – the Arrowmaker Rock Shop. We moved tons of rock, display cases and equipment to MY home on Maple Lane.

The Prescott VA was happy to see someone special in Bob's life. He had been a fixture there, on and off, for 15 years. They made me aware of how sick he really was. I learned to be his pill keeper, oxygen regulator and blood sugar monitor. I lost weight and gained muscle tone by hauling his wheelchair in and out of the Toyota Tundra. (Which got a new transmission after the engine fire.)

I collected each paper wrist ID bracelet the VA issued, when Bob was seen or admitted. Over the next two years I made a paper chain, of interlocked rings that exceeded 6 feet in length. During some visits I got mad and was once reduced to tears, when Bob could not get any relief from his back pain. He was already on a maximum dose of morphine. The stress on me began to show. Finally, the VA approved 2 procedures where a specialist would 'fortify' Bob's spinal discs with an injection. It was done while he was awake and the incision closed with a band aide. The procedures reduced his pain considerably. However, it was his lungs that were really scary. I recall one night where he appeared to cough up black 'spiders' - definitely a bad sign...

I was there for Bob, and we made the best of what time we had left together. *****

My affinity for rocks became an allegory for my spiritual self. Only God was more steadfast than a rock. Both equally unknowable without eyes to see beyond one realm into the next.

"Beauty is only skin deep...well, with rocks it's the other way (around). God is showing you. Damn (you say) that's ugly...and you think maybe (there's) nothing in there either. Then it turns out to be the most beautiful on the inside. That's me! I'm that ugly rock!"

As a child I used to climb on a huge granite boulder I called 'Gray Rock'. Part of a poem I wrote alluded to it.

On days when I needed solace and grace -

I went to a rock, with a gray granite face.

Warm and secure, there I'd perch -

Far better than any old church.

I whispered hopes and dreams with tears -

The heavens heard, the rock had ears.

(The ending went like this) -

So, I turned to face the sunset, with a man whose days were few -

His never-ending gift of love, was solid, warm and true.

I made the difference in his life and for me he broke the lock -

He set my heart and spirit free... I'd found my old gray rock!